Public Health History - Nutrition
03/05/07

Overweight and obesity have become serious public health issues in the United States. In fact, according to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) since the mid-seventies the prevalence of obesity among adults has increased from 15% to nearly 33%. Children are also affected. In the last 25 years, the prevalence of obesity among children age 2 – 19 has seen an average increase of more than 12%.

One of the contributors to obesity is improper eating. But that has been a problem in America for centuries. In fact, potato chips were introduced as early as 1853 as America's first junk food.

Carbohydrates, protein and fat were identified in 1900. And in 1939 military physicals revealed that many Americans were in poor health. A war order demanded that white bread be enriched. But at the same time, fat-laden beef replaced pork as America's favorite meat.

In 1945 the Framingham Heart Study revealed that high cholesterol and poor diet were two of five risk factors for heart disease. But habits did not change. In 1966 French fries at fast food restaurants became America's favorite food, although they had more saturated fat per ounce than fast food hamburgers. At this time one-fourth of a child's daily vegetable intake is still from potato chips and French fries.

In response to declining beef sales in 1983, chicken nuggets were introduced as a "healthy" fast food, although they often contain twice as much fat per ounce as a hamburger.

The Nutrition Labeling and Education Act of 1990 required most foods (except meat and poultry) to provide nutrition labels, such as the one developed in 1973. It also authorized the use of nutrient content claims and appropriate FDA-approved health claims. The USDA food pyramid established in 1992 replaced the Four Food Groups of the 1950s and sought to educate the public about healthy food choices.

Today initiatives like the Women, Infants and Children (WIC) program, "5 a Day the Color Way" and "MyPyramid" also encourage healthy eating habits. But ultimately the choice is an individual one.

It's up to each one of us to change our nation's history. You can start fighting obesity today by reading food labels, by making healthy food choices for yourself and by encouraging your friends and family to do the same.

For more information on nutrition, contact the Springfield-Greene County Health Department at (417) 864-1658.